

U.P. church looks for God in Michigan's outdoors

ugged Upper Peninsula, one church is drawing members by seeking spirituality in



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“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.” – Acts 17:24-28

MARQUETTE – The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters, and singing through the birds in the trees, and shining upon those gathered at the shore from the sun on high. For the Spirit was everywhere.

A small congregation stood in a forested park at the edge of Lake Superior. They were gathered on an autumn Sunday to experience God in the wilderness of the Upper Peninsula. They were in their church.

“If we believe in a creating God, which we do, then God would have created everything around us,” said Lanni Lantto, the 46-year-old founder of [U.P. Wild Church](#). “So, when we step out into the natural world, into God's domain, we're stepping out into God's artistry. And so we are experiencing God all around us, in all the living beings that we believe we are a part of.”

Lantto founded the U.P. Wild Church in 2018. Its core tenet is that God is revealed in the wild. And there are few places where nature is as wild or as woven into everyday life as in Michigan's sparsely populated Upper Peninsula, where dense forests cover nearly 85% of the land. Even for those without any religious inclination, the outdoors Up North often sparks a sense of wonder and awe.

“Being rooted in nature is something that is the unifying factor for most people up here,” said Amelia Pruitt, a 31-year-old who was attending the Marquette branch’s prayer services for the first time with her newborn baby. “I’ve always loved nature. And then to tie it directly to religion is something special.”

U.P. Wild Church branches hold services on the last Sunday of every month. It isn’t nature worship; the gatherings aren’t much different than an Episcopalian or Lutheran service. But there’s an undertone of environmentalism and conservation.

“U.P. Wild is a diverse faith community that cultivates the roots of Christianity, recognizing that the wilderness has always been and still is a place of holy connection, revelation, wonderment and healing,” says its mission statement. “Gathering together we bear witness to the holiness around us within a living breathing eco-system. We open the Book of Nature.”

At prayer services, there are readings from scripture and from wilderness authors. A discussion takes place. There’s often a group activity, and almost always a potluck. But then, everyone heads outdoors to wander and see what the Upper Peninsula wilderness reveals.

“To me, inside, we’re limited,” said Bill Davis, 76, a retired social worker and regular attendee. “You can’t see the sky, you can’t see the full view. But outside, it’s just like you’re surrounded. Consequently, you’re open to everything. It’s just another level of spirituality. I go to church every Sunday at a regular Lutheran church, I was there this morning. But this is just another dimension.”

Some people at the gathering focused on the ground as they strolled, others looked up toward the trees and the sky beyond, one or two picked up a leaf and got lost in its details. The walk was part prayer, part meditation, part reflection. For many, this is the reason they come.

“The first thing that brought me here was that I feel God’s presence most in the wilderness,” said Camille Hamilton, 47, of Harvey. “I moved up here because of the nature, and me showing up for this group, I just came to God in a different way than I ever had before. And it’s so simple: an eagle flies out or a squirrel drops something and there’s just a connectivity between all of those elements that I feel. It’s more directly spiritual.”

“This glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes within the broad overwhelming influences of the place fails not to worship as they never did before.” – John Muir, conservationist

Lantto grew up in Michigan, moved away for a time, then returned to the Upper Peninsula, where she lives with her husband and two kids. She’s always been environmentally inclined; she spent years as a fashion redesigner, as she calls it, recycling old clothing into newly created fashions.

“I love the concept of eco-awareness and sustainability and upcycling — taking something that’s going to get thrown away and reusing it,” she said. “Sometimes I feel like this is what Wild Church is. Like, a lot of these people have kind of been thrown away by their church, and this is a way to upcycle their faith.”

Eight years ago, she was at a park, watching her son play, when the idea for U.P. Wild came to her. Her Episcopalian church, like other denominations, had struggled to attract younger people, and her church’s diocese had hired her to come up with a new ministry that might draw them in.

“I was hearing everybody talk about doing dinner church, and bar church, and all of that,” she said. “And I’m listening to these conversations, I’m like, ‘Why is nobody doing anything outside?’ Especially since we live in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, it’s a no-brainer, right?”

U.P. Wild is loosely aligned with the Wild Church Network, founded 10 years ago in California as a decentralized collection of branches connected by the philosophy of “returning to nature as spiritual practice.” That philosophy resonates deeply in the Upper Peninsula.

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“In a way, you can’t escape it up here,” said Rayford Ray, 69, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan. “Nature is part of who we are and how we live. We live in the hinterlands. It’s not like it’s in the boondocks or anything, but it’s a different way of being. I can walk out my front door and Lake Michigan is just across the street.”

Since its founding eight years ago, U.P. Wild has grown to seven branches: Keweenaw, Delta County, Marquette, Menominee, Munising, Paradise and a branch that covers the U.P. east and north of the Mackinac Bridge. It's officially part of the Episcopalian Diocese of Northern Michigan, and is also in conjunction with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Northern Great Lakes Synod.

"It's the fastest-growing part of our church," Ray said, "because I think people are finding — at least up here — where nature is part of who and what we are, that sacredness is everywhere. And I think people connect with that. We're getting contacted from all over. Next week, I go to Alaska and we're going to be talking about the ministry we do here."

Besides monthly prayer services, the branches hosts tree plantings, wilderness walks, coffee gatherings and crafting hours. Once a year, members gather on the Stonington Peninsula along the shore of Lake Michigan to watch monarch butterflies head south for the winter.

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"I think it just, at this point for me, all of nature speaks to the presence of a higher power," said 90-year-old Ken Kelley, a former social work professor at Northern Michigan University who's part of the Marquette branch of U.P. Wild. "And we behave stupidly with a lot of it. I think for us, it's a matter of being part of it, not managing it."

The walks in nature also serve another purpose. Nature, Lantto said, not only shines with the presence of God, but also reveals universal truths that apply to human life as well.

"Spiritually, there are many lessons to learn from nature at this time of year," she told the group during its autumn gathering. The squirrels and chipmunks were gathering food, the trees were drawing down into dormancy, the forests were readying for sleep. There were lessons and metaphors all around.

"Can we accept the changes made in the seasons of our lives instead of resisting them?" she asked. "How do we spiritually prepare for colder, darker times of our lives?"

"Nature is too thin a screen; the glory of the omnipresent God bursts through everywhere."
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, author and naturalist.

Months later and miles away, a new season had begun.

A few dozen people were gathered inside a home in Rapid River for the monthly prayer service of U.P. Wild's Delta County branch, about two hours west of the Mackinac Bridge. There were readings and prayers. People shared their thoughts. There was a potluck meal. And everyone headed outside.

It was finally spring. The long winter was in retreat. The landscape showed signs of rebirth.

Cynthia Ivy stood at the edge of the pond in her backyard. "I'm pretty much just looking around and noticing things," the 72-year-old said. A goose floated past. Cattails wavered in the wind. White birch trees dotted the woods. "I lived in California for 30 years. I didn't have trees or anything like that. So being out here, sometimes I walk in the woods back here, and I feel like the trees are talking."

Behind her, Bobbi Ryan stood on her deck. She and Ivy host the branch's monthly services at their house, 80 acres of land along the edge of a national forest, so remote that cell phones often don't work in the area.

"I don't think we take enough time, in general, to look and see what God gives us," the 60-year-old said while surveying her yard. "Just now I took a walk, and that's the first walk on my property I've taken since I can't tell you when. I go 100 miles per hour all the time. So, to take a minute and just go look at this, look at that, here's a nest and whatever, to me it's like you get an opportunity to say, 'Thank you.' You've got to take the time to say, 'Thank you.'"

Last fall's dried leaves crunched underfoot as Dave Keller walked slowly across the lawn, savoring the moment before joining the others back inside, where everyone would share what they'd experienced. There were countless details to ponder out here, innumerable revelations waiting to be had, a glimpse of God behind everything. He was in church, one like no other.

"There's an automatic connection as soon as I step out into this," the 78-year-old said.

He moved here years ago for a job and stayed because of its peace and solitude. "And it took moving up here to realize just how much a part of all of this I am, and it is in me. So I couldn't be in a better place for myself right now. I've matured and changed, and I guess I realize that no amount of city life can replace this kind of thing. This is just wonderful, natural, spiritual — fulfilling in almost every way."

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